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It's Not Just Deterrence: Why a World Without Nuclear Weapons is Unlikely

International geopolitics, domestic incentives, and contemporary cultural customs diminish the likelihood of a world without nuclear weapons. After the United States used two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, the Soviet Union, United Kingdom, France, and China all developed their own weapons within the two subsequent decades. Although the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 tried to prevent continued development of these weapons, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea have since developed their own arsenals. As of 2026, there are 12,200 active nuclear warheads across the world to dismantle before a world without nuclear weapons is reached.¹

The path towards a world without nuclear weapons is obstructed by the incentives a state leader faces to acquire and proliferate nuclear weapons, including safety through nuclear deterrence, an advantage over opponents in an arms race, and support from domestic constituencies. The dominant literature about nuclear weapons references security models that commonly interpret nuclear weapons as acquired for security benefits.² Global politics academic Avery Goldstein characterized China's 1960s nuclear weapons program as a pursuit of "robust

¹ "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance>.

² *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State*, publication no. 82 (Wright Flyer Papers, March 2021), 10, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Papers/WF_82_CURTICE_WHY_DO_STATES_BUILD_NUCLEAR_WEAPONS_PROLIFERATION_MODELS_AS_CONCURRENT_PRESSURES_ON_A_STATE

and affordable security," observing that China's nuclear deterrent superseded its routine, less effective conventional deterrent.³ China's acquisition of its nuclear weapon, motivated largely by nuclear risks from adversaries like the Soviet Union and the United States, begot a nuclear response from neighboring adversary India in the form of its own nuclear weapon. As a response to India, Pakistan followed in its own nuclear arms program.⁴ This chain reaction suggests the proliferation of nuclear weapons by a state creates insecurity in adversarial states, which causes adversarial states to proliferate their own weapons as a defensive response.

Rapid acquisition of weapons among adversarial states could trigger arms races. Arms races – both active and potential – heighten tensions between states, which prompts continued development of nuclear weapons. Prime minister Bhutto of Pakistan expressed in 1965 the urgency at which Pakistan would engage in the arms race against India: "If India makes an atom bomb, then even if we have to feed on grass and leaves—or even if we have to starve—we shall also produce an atom bomb as we would be left with no other alternative."⁵ From the perspective of a nuclear-armed state's adversaries, active engagement in a nuclear weapons arms race is motivated by survival.

While the arms race between Pakistan and India is an overt example of an arms race, the motivation driving the two states to continually develop nuclear weapons is not limited to states in active arms races. International security academic Scott D. Sagan observes a shared "fundamental fear" in nuclear-capable states of being surpassed by other nuclear-capable states, which motivates capable states to develop nuclear weapons.⁶ This fear emerges in present times

³ Avery Goldstein, "Robust and Affordable Security: Some Lessons from the Second-Ranking Powers during the Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 15, no. 4 (1992): 494, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399208437496>.

⁴ Scott D. Sagan, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb* (MIT Press, 1996), 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539273>.

⁵ Feroz Khan, ed., *Eating Grass*, *Eating Grass* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 7, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804784801>.

⁶ Sagan, *Why Do States*, 58.

through planned nuclear weapons development even in the absence of active arms races. In 2023, when asked about plans for a military nuclear programme, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman explained that if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, “we [the Saudis] will have to get one.”⁷ Arms races, whether actively ongoing or not, motivate heads of state to encourage nuclear weapons procurement.

Aside from national security benefits and arms race tensions as motivators behind the choice to develop nuclear weapons by heads of state, world leaders also face domestic political incentives to strengthen national nuclear weapons programs. After authorizing a 1974 nuclear bomb test – notably, without first consulting senior defense and foreign affairs officials – Prime Minister Gandhi of India rescued her standing in public opinion polls across the country, yielding a one-third increase in public support for her administration in the month following the test.⁸ When creating policies on nuclear weapons development, the political rewards for leadership that invests in nuclear weaponry serves as an incentive for country leaders to develop rather than dismantle nuclear arsenals. In 2023, seven in ten Americans polled expressed they would vote for a candidate who shares their views on nuclear policy; furthermore, two-thirds of Americans upheld that US nuclear weapons have been effective at deterring conflict between the US and other countries.⁹ Considering this distribution of public opinion, US representatives are prompted to advocate for further development of nuclear weapons to secure support from constituents.

Although the political incentives of developing nuclear weapons reward pro-bomb heads of state, especially those interested in optimizing their political favorability, replacing such

⁷ "Crown prince confirms Saudi Arabia will seek nuclear arsenal if Iran develops one," The Guardian, last modified 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/21/crown-prince-confirms-saudi-arabia-seek-nuclear-arsenal-iran-develops-one>.

⁸ Sagan, *Why Do States*, 68.

⁹ "Majority in US Want to Learn More about Nuclear Policy," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, last modified 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/majority-us-want-learn-more-about-nuclear-policy>.

pro-bomb heads of state will not immediately create favorable conditions for nuclear weapon disarmament, because incentives for nuclear weapon acquisition extend to institutions throughout a state. The scientific-military-industrial complex represents a shared interest across multilateral bodies to develop nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Against the combined strength of non-state bodies supporting a national nuclear weapons program, reversing a national pro-bomb stance on nuclear weapon acquisition proves difficult. The 1970s nuclear weapons project of India was strongly supported by the physicist and “father of the Indian nuclear programme” Homi Bhabha, who lobbied fiercely for the project until the government leadership complied.¹¹ In this way, the nuclear policies and initiatives of a state are not only spearheaded by state leadership or individual opportunistic leaders responding to political incentives; rather, the web of interconnected scientific, militaristic, and industrial non-state institutions enjoy significant economic and political rewards for nuclear proliferation. These non-state institutions and their vested interests in nuclear weapon development reveal a complex economic challenge to nuclear disarmament: even with political change at the government level, a state shifting from weapon development policy to weapon disarmament policy is unlikely unless the broader non-state institutions also have economic incentive to disarm.

Whereas government officials and heads of economic institutions reserve the authority to negotiate and actively shape national nuclear weapons policy, the general public engages in building cultural attitudes towards nuclear weapons. The cultural portrayals of nuclear weapons, built by common people and the media lean towards weapon procurement, thereby further obstructing the path towards a world without nuclear weapons.

¹⁰ Sagan, *Why Do States*, 64.

¹¹ Sagan, *Why Do States*, 66.

A 2023 survey by the Chicago Public Affairs Council found that Americans, by a ratio of 5 to 1, believe the nuclear weapons arsenal makes the US safer rather than less safe.¹² This shared pro-bomb cultural perception by the public de-incentivizes both governments and the people to contribute to disarmament causes. A 2025 NTI report documents citizens' indifferent attitude resulting from a pro-bomb cultural sentiment manifesting as disengagement with nuclear policy entirely: only a third of the US public believed they had a role to play, and nearly half believed that even through teamwork, the public would stay powerless on US nuclear weapons policy.¹³ Pro-bomb attitudes and mythmaking dissuade the US public participation in US nuclear weapons policy, which hinders disarmament efforts of the world's second largest nuclear arsenal.

The hesitance by both media institutions and the US government to acknowledge the effects of nuclear weapon use exacerbates the public's enthusiasm for nuclear weapon development. The US-based Smithsonian Institution – the leading education and research complex worldwide – cancelled a planned exhibit questioning the morality of the WWII bombings by the United States on Japan after pressure from the public, the Air Force Association, the American Legion, and the Senate.¹⁴ During Obama's 2016 visit to Hiroshima, he exercised restraint in expressing condolences to the bombing victims, and neither he nor subsequent presidents issued an official apology. The Smithsonian's scrapping of the planned exhibition, paired with the position of the US government, illustrate the suppression of anti-nuclear weapon narratives in popular discourse: the dismissal by media institutions and the

¹² "Majority in US Want," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

¹³ *Rewriting the Narrative on Nuclear Weapons: A research-based guide to building a safer future* (NTI, 2025), 29, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/rewriting-the-narrative-on-nuclear-weapons-a-research-based-guide-to-building-a-safer-future/>.

¹⁴ "Exhibiting the Enola Gay," Smithsonian Institution Archives, <https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/exhibiting-enola-gay>.

US government of the convictions against nuclear weapons privileges pro-bomb views' integration with mainstream cultural opinion.

In the age of information, internet users from around the world can express their favorable and opposing views on nuclear weapons, facing less censorship risk from the government than an institution like the Smithsonian Institution would. However, it would be incorrect to assume that anti-bomb opinions supersede a dominant pro-bomb opinion, because mainstream media disadvantages sincere discussion about nuclear weapons. For example, while record-breaking film *Oppenheimer* (2023) generated online buzz before the movie's release, the film ultimately failed to create a significant uptick in online searches about nuclear weapons in the immediate subsequent months, likely because the film refused to focus on the nuclear bomb use itself.¹⁵ The trends suggest that the general public treats the topic of nuclear weapons with inadequate gravity, thereby further obfuscating incentives for disarmament.

According to liberal institutionalist thought in international relations, global cooperation can be achieved through use of international bodies such as the United Nations, and such institutions should be utilized for global nuclear disarmament. However, the current international political structure lacks institutional infrastructure for collective nuclear disarmament. Given the structure of the Security Council, where any of the permanent members can prevent a resolution from passing despite majority members supporting it, each permanent member could defend an ally state from a nuclear nonproliferation resolution concerning them.¹⁶ Furthermore, the United Nations aims to protect state sovereignty, and lacks jurisdiction over a state's nuclear programme beyond resolutions and treaties. One potential way to prompt international disarmament through

¹⁵ "Beyond Oppenheimer: Nuclear Weapons in U.S. Popular Media," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-06/features/beyond-oppenheimer-nuclear-weapons-us-popular-media>.

¹⁶ Rachel A. Weise, *HOW NUCLEAR WEAPONS CHANGE THE DOCTRINE OF SELF-DEFENSE*, 9, <https://nyujilp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/44.4-Weise.pdf>.

international bodies would not take the form of a peace deal or disarmament obligation; rather, it would be an international agreement to change the economic structure motivating domestic institutions to push for further proliferation. The nuclear weapons labs across the US employ majority specialists whose expertise is not easily transferable from nuclear weapons.¹⁷ In establishing opportunity outside of nuclear weapons development, governments would decrease incentive pressure to continue cultivating nuclear weapons. If states collaborate on this initiative, domestic actors globally would be contributing to a disarmament effort to relieve countries of nuclear weapons pressure.

Considering a state's international and domestic political motivations and the cultural attitude towards nuclear weapon development in the media, a world without nuclear weapons is unrealistic to imagine in the near future. First, a state's leadership is incentivized both by the deterrence inherent in nuclear weapons, and by the public support benefit to spearheading a weapons program. Second, pro-bomb opinions dominate mainstream outlets, with a higher representation of pro-bomb than anti-bomb views and institutions' reluctance to acknowledge the repercussions of nuclear weapon development. With the support of state governments, institutions, domestic constituents, and the media, nuclear weapons are postured to remain inseparable from national militaries of nuclear states. However, all barriers to disarmament considered, a world without nuclear weapons is not impossible; international state cooperation prompting significant domestic institutional shifts away from the nuclear weapon development sectors could aid efforts toward a more disarmed world, or a world without such active

¹⁷ "A Nuclear Just Transition: Breaking the Political Economy of U.S. Nuclear Entrenchment," Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, <https://www.wagingpeace.org/a-nuclear-just-transition-breaking-the-political-economy-of-u-s-nuclear-entrenchment/>

proliferation as now. A world without nuclear weapons remains unlikely, but a path away from imminent nuclear catastrophe is possible and crucial.

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